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The State of China's Soft Power in 2020

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China's soft power, the power of attraction, is as often debated as it is misunderstood. The US boasts Hollywood, globally-recognized brands and companies, and its quest for democratic 'evangelization'; the European Union has a romantic and touristic appeal, a (struggling) sense of supranational unity, and its far-reaching foreign policy of assistance; Japan and South Korea are both formidable pop-culture exporters. But what about China's soft power resources and strategies? When read through Joseph Nye's triad – culture, values, and policies – it may be hard to identify the sources of attraction. China's culture still has limited appeal, its values mostly fail to reflect the country's image and reputation abroad, and its foreign policy is seen with skepticism at best – and as hegemonic at worst. Thus, it is legitimate to ask whether China's 'charm offensive' is losing momentum.

Following its phenomenal economic growth over the past few decades, most of China's appeal resides in this successful story, especially in the eyes of developing countries. However, the process is still in the making. Although tens of millions of citizens have been lifted from poverty, fears of falling into the middle-income trap are present, along with domestic problems such as an aging population and concerns about a sustainable innovation pace. More broadly, it is fair to say that China's soft power heavily relies on its economic clout.

In his oft-quoted book *Charm Offensive: How China's Soft Power Is Transforming the World*, Joshua Kurlantzick was one of the first to point out that China conceives soft power in a broader way. Through international aid and assistance, the country has been blurring the boundaries between soft and economic power. Similarly, John Wong observed that China is building its economic soft power. This includes skillful economic diplomacy and is exemplified by major regional trade agreements or expanded official development assistance (ODA) towards cooperation. David Shambaugh, one of the foremost China experts, claimed that the strongest instrument in Beijing's soft power toolbox is money.

The ongoing Covid-19 pandemic is a stark example of China's 'soft' economic diplomacy. Accused to be covering up the issue at first, it has since embarked in so-called 'mask diplomacy' to portray itself as a responsible and helpful international actor. Even in this case, reactions have been mixed. But it is undeniable that the China has been able to provide assistance in various forms because of its economic capabilities. More recently, Xi Jinping promised that, whenever ready, the vaccine would be universally available. This is in striking contrast with Donald Trump's alleged attempt to purchase a vaccine developed in Germany to be first used in America. While it is too early to say, it can be argued that countries benefitting from China's assistance will not forget the deed.

Even when observed from a narrower cultural perspective, it is hard to separate China's strategies of attraction from its economic power. Few countries have the financial resources to be able to open cultural centers across the globe to promote exchange towards mutual understanding. Currently, China has more than 500 Confucius Institutes and classes. Although some have been closed following concerns of meddling with academic freedom on university campuses, most developing countries welcome them, especially considering that they teach an increasingly useful language, while also offering scholarships to study in China.

One more example is China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), an ambitious plan to connect the world to the 'Middle Kingdom', presented as beneficial to all involved partners. One of the principles is to connect diverse communities and cultures, and even in this case, it is supported by economic initiatives and incentives. Although the pandemic has

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affected several ongoing projects, China will push forward as the situation allows. The widespread need for infrastructure has not decreased because of Covid-19, but some aspects should be reconsidered, such as hiring locally instead of using Chinese labor. Much criticized in the West, there is only inconclusive evidence of a true 'debt trap' so far.

With that said, while not equating the two, comparisons between the US' Marshall Plan and the BRI are already present. Following the 2009 Financial Crisis and the 2020 Pandemic, will the BRI define a new era of global socioeconomic interactions towards shared prosperity? If so, the benefitting countries are expected to recognize the merits of China, which by then would have reinstated its centrality at least in the Asian continent. Such a major structural advantage, characterized by economic interdependence through connectivity, would grant Beijing multiple channels of influence. Hypothetically, thanks to both land connections and the Digital Silk Road, China's achievements may ultimately be considered even greater than its American counterpart.

Such instances show the tight interaction between China's soft and economic power, such as through funding to influence diaspora communities. This is why observers argue that the country's strategies are not so soft after all.

Drawing from the above examples, China's 'mask diplomacy' is heavily dependent on its economic capabilities and extensive diplomatic reach. The worldwide reach of Confucius Institutes relies on fund availability and allocation, and the BRI is only possible because of China's unprecedented economic achievements. While not certain, a country that has received generous and timely assistance in a moment of need, or whose youth can access educational and professional opportunities offered by cultural institutes, or that is going to see considerable economic gains following the completion of a high-speed railway or a new 5G network (and even a combination of all of these), is expected to cultivate goodwill towards China. This is particularly true if the developments benefit the wider population as much as leaders and policymakers, result in a genuine win-win situation.

All considered, what is the status of China's soft power in 2020? And is there a soft power with Chinese characteristics? Several studies label the country's conduct as a form of deceptive and manipulative 'sharp power', yet these methods are not always recognizable nor necessary. Depending on whom you ask and what message and values are being promoted, propagandistic attempts are not exclusive to authoritarian actors. Far from suggesting that Beijing's intents are consistently honest and transparent, China seems to adapt its strategies to each country, and its soft power 'sharpens' upon necessity. However, skeptical observers would be inclined to highlight the negative side of its actions.

That said, China's external interactions are complex, but it can still be argued – in line with the official policy – that the country's intents are firstly economic and only secondly ideological and political. Whether a new Cold War is about to start or not, China's efforts are primarily targeted at developing countries, with a particular focus on its South-east Asian neighbors, hence the need to further attract them might be stronger than ever.

When compared to the US, both have greatly benefitted from economic achievements, but America was able to acquire structural advantages – both hard and soft – from which most countries simply cannot opt-out. These are exemplified by its role in international institutions, the prominence of the dollar in global trade and exchanges, and the near ubiquitous presence of American brands, cultural products, and lifestyle embraced and taken for granted by many. For the time being, although arguably declining because of Trump's 'America First' policy, this phenomenon is self-sustaining, and China has limited chances to challenge it.

Countries like Japan and South Korea have managed to create an attractive national image abroad, mostly because of the freedom given to the creative industries that is lacking in China. Accordingly, soft power is said to originate from multiple actors beyond the state, such as the private sector and civil society. China's soft (and hard) efforts are instead centralized and in control of the government. This results in limiting some resources, such as the development of an appealing popular culture, while enhancing others, such as through the swift allocation and deployment of financial and human resources whenever the need arises. Although not as 'soft' and outwardly harmless as K-pop or a Disney movie, China's 'charm offensive' can potentially be more effective in resulting in specific outcomes. After all, the influence of an attractive lifestyle and culture is arguably weaker than the attraction

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generated by tangible aid and scholarships, especially in times of need.

Aware of the fine line between soft and economic dynamics, Nye himself lamented that 'sometimes in real world situations, it is difficult to distinguish what part of an economic relationship comprises hard and soft power.' China's strategies highlight its decision makers' willingness to test the boundaries between attraction and inducement.

In spite of what some IR scholars may say, China cannot afford to abandon soft power efforts, which are an essential aspect of modern international relations. While it is uncertain how Covid-19 will continue to affect us, and how China's image and reputation will emerge from it, the BRI still appears to be the country's best shot to prove its detractors wrong. Thus, as long as it is supported by economic assets and growth, China's soft power is bound to attract. Softer methods with Chinese characteristics may eventually come, but there seems to be no urgency.

About the author:

Daniele Carminati is a lecturer in International Relations and Diplomacy at the Beijing Foreign Studies University and holds a PhD in International Relations from the City University of Hong Kong. His research interest revolves around the sociocultural, economic, and political implications of globalization in East and Southeast Asia with a particular focus on soft power dynamics. Daniele is also a former commissioning editor at E-International Relations.